

Trinidad and Tobago: Made for Trade

By Omar González

Hardly your run-of-the-mill tourist destination, Trinidad and Tobago (a small country spanning two islands) is arguably the most culturally diverse and colorful nation in the Caribbean, with several factors setting it apart from its neighbors. Moreover, this land of steel drums and sunny skies is a paradise for trade as well as vacationers.

Sizing Up the Market

First of all, Trinidad and Tobago stands out as one of the largest, most heavily populated countries in the Caribbean. It has a high degree of diversity: 40 percent of the population is of East Indian descent, another 40 percent of African heritage, and the remainder of Chinese, Middle Eastern or European descent. This makes for an interesting blend of cultures and religions unique in the region.

The country has enjoyed seven straight years of real growth in gross domestic product (GDP), with an average annual rate of 3.8 percent. Moreover, tourism—the back-

bone of most Caribbean economies—takes a back seat here to energy, financial services, manufacturing and other dynamic sectors as mainstays of the country's economy.

Just to keep matters interesting, Trinidad and Tobago could hardly be more different from each other. Most of the 1.3 million residents live on Trinidad, a mix of urban sprawl, rain-forested mountains and small farming communities with an economy based on the energy industry. Tobago, known for its beautiful beaches and laid-back atmosphere, depends primarily on tourism.



GETTING ESTABLISHED IN THIS MARKET IS A CHALLENGE, BUT EXPORTERS WITH RELIABLE REPUTATIONS CAN THRIVE.

The energy sector is the true driving force behind the country's economy. Since 1990, its oil and natural gas production has increased 50 percent, and newly discovered reserves will likely lead to a boom over the next several years. One recent find alone is forecast to yield 1 billion barrels of oil and 2.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

Drilling expenditures are expected to have surged from \$163 million in 2001 to \$637 million in 2002. Some 154 new wells are being drilled this year, 25 for exploration. Moreover, investments in liquefied natural gas (LNG) infrastructure are projected to make Trinidad and Tobago the world's fifth-largest LNG producer by 2005.

Tourism accounts for only 2-3 percent of national GDP, compared with 60-80 percent in many other Caribbean countries. Tobago's tourism season, like that of other Caribbean islands, runs primarily from Thanksgiving to Easter, and usually experiences a slight boost during Tobago's Heritage Festival in July. Most of Trinidad's tourists, on the other hand, arrive for its Carnival (Mardi Gras) celebration, the biggest in the Caribbean. Trinidad also is a choice location for business conferences, because many businesses are headquartered there.

Doing Business in the Country

When shipping products to Trinidad and Tobago, all labels must be in English, the country's official language.

Multilingual labels are fine, but English must be one of the languages used, so standard U.S. labels are accepted and generally are more than adequate to meet labeling standards.

The main panel must have the brand name plus any common name by which the food is known. It should also list net contents: weight, volume and/or number.

If the food is packaged in liquid, the drained weight should be used. Net weight is not required if the quantity of food is less than 56 grams or 56 milliliters.

The label must list ingredients in order by weight or percentage and a contact address for the producer or packer. The address must include the city, state and country of origin.

The label must also list preservatives, food additives, colorings, expiration date, storage requirements and a batch or lot number.

New-to-market exporters should be aware that they will receive extra scrutiny until they establish a good track record. Random inspection at port occurs often, and inspections at retail may also happen.

Companies new to the market may use stick-on labels for up to three months, after which time they must make all their labels permanent.

Nutritional Claims

At present, the government of Trinidad and Tobago does not have specific nutritional labeling requirements.

This is likely to change, however, because the government is developing new compulsory standards for nutritional labeling, including recommended daily intake requirements.

These requirements will be modeled after U.S. and Canadian standards. In the meantime, it is acceptable to use nutrient content claims such as: "low in saturated fat," "high-fiber" or "reduced sugar." One should avoid therapeutic claims, as these foods may be reclassified as medicines.

Plans for Package Regulations

Trinidad and Tobago has no packag-

ing, waste disposal or recycling regulations, although the government may soon change that. Manufacturers have the flexibility of using any packaging material as long as it is acceptable for use with food products.

Food Additives: It's Alimentary

The Trinidadian Ministry of Health has no specific regulations for food additives. As a general rule, the country relies on internationally accepted Codex Alimentarius (Codex) standards.

Health officials may also rely on European and U.S. standards if certain additives are not listed in the Codex standards. U.S. exporters who wish to sell a food with a new additive should first check with the government.

With pesticides, much as with food additives, health officials also follow the Codex standards, and often refer to U.S. standards as well. ■

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